

# Dylann Roof: a Case Study on How Hatred Becomes Motive

Holden Gill

Oregon State University

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On June 17, 2015, then 21-year-old Dylann Roof entered the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, and opened fire during a Bible study session with the intent of murdering Black parishioners. This crime was not random nor arbitrary—it was ideologically motivated, performed with intent to destroy and threaten any perceived feelings of safety in Black Americans and Black American religiosity. In his manifesto and post-crime confessions, Roof explicitly cited white supremacist beliefs and a desire to incite a “race war” (FBI, 2016). What shaped those beliefs, what allowed his crimes to come to fruition, and what made him such a susceptible target for the imprinting of racist extremist ideology is most crucial in determining how the tirade of similar others can be halted.

The case of Roof exemplifies a deep-rooted and dangerous psychological and sociological dilemma: the development of extremist ideology becoming terrorism. Roof committed a hate crime: violence against a specific racial demographic, with the intent to terrorize and dehumanize based on the immutable characteristic of race. According to the FBI’s 2022 Hate Crime Statistics report, more than 10,000 hate crime incidents were reported that year, with over 50% motivated by race or ethnicity, and Black Americans being the most targeted group. To understand how individuals like Roof become radicalized—particularly young white males who feel culturally disconnected or aggrieved—is to intervene and further develop preventative legal and community deterrence and policy. The lack of nuance in Roof’s manifesto does not lead to a particular disconnect from the typical understandings of bigotry, though emphasizes how any bigotry, when maintained and developed, may reach a tipping point of disaster. Roof as a case study follows a man whose perceptions were molded by his environment; a lack of education and exposure to the diverse ecology of the modern United States led to arrogance, and socialization through his similarly-oriented cohorts began a demonstration of said arrogance.

The intersection of psychological and legal theory is evident throughout the case of Roof, where racist extremism is magnified by the readily available web of opinions which is the internet, and through consumption are new ideas born—cherry-picked as a means of maintaining the arrogance that forms this path, and manifesting new means of hate—and legal protections must then be modernized. How individuals misuse such internet content depends much on their exposure. The intersection of criminal motivation and social perception of hate crime manifests as perception of a perceived benefit versus potential for punishment, and one's own exposure and subsequent socialization: as individuals choose to commit crimes by weighing their perceived benefit with the crime's deterrence, they choose whether the crime is worth committing. In hate crimes, the perception of punishment does not outweigh the perception of benefit when the motivation is to send a message perceived by the offender as both groundbreaking and inevitable to a targeted demographic. When the offender is raised without exposure to certain demographics, they have little will to change what they have been fed by their similarly-positioned cohorts in an echochamber of bigotry, and they fail to recognize major sociological fallacies in their thought processes. This allows them to harbour the hate and grow it through the aforementioned continued cherry-picked exposure, until the tipping point—at which they offend.

Psycho-legal research explains many psychological phenomena through a legal lens: identity confusion—how individuals with confusion regarding an aspect of their identity tend to commit crime and deviant behavior and why, isolation—what types of crimes socially-isolated individuals commit and why, and racist extremism—what qualities individuals with racist extremist beliefs tend to have, and how such qualities make them so susceptible to terrorist action. This research connects cognitive systems and sociological explanations to legal phenomena. Hate crimes are distinct for their symbolic nature and broader social consequences; sending a message to entire

communities regarding others' perception of them, inciting fear and distrust between them. Roof's actions functioned precisely in this way. By attacking a place of worship and targeting individuals based on their racial identity, he attempted to make a public, ideological statement and threat.

Roof's radicalization through a lack of exposure, isolation, and a demographic target prominently hated in his own community, with his similarly-positioned cohorts, fits the framework of many psychological theories, especially those which factor in the self-consciousness, arrogance and fear of others. Many forms of psychology provide more than just the frameworks for the intersection between self-consciousness and antisocial behavior—especially towards specific demographics—research provides the ability to understand why young men who are isolated from outgroup perspective—whose own perspective is maintained by an echo chamber—are most susceptible to arrogance and hate campaigns. Young adults experiencing identity confusion or disconnect from potential peer groups are especially vulnerable to extremist ideologies (Hogg, 2012). Roof's demographic reflects this risk profile.

Hogg, M. A. (2012). Uncertainty–identity theory. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 39, 69–126

Michael Hogg presents a potential framework for understanding confusion and a lack of acceptance of self in young men, by affiliating with social groups that provide clear identity structures. His theory posits that when individuals experience uncertainty, particularly about who they are or how they fit into the world, they are motivated to reduce discomfort through communication. Such communication provides an ability to adopt a strong group identity, and

may provide them with a better understanding of demographics they had little exposure to before.

Holloway, C. (2016). Expert Witnesses Used During Trial of Dylann Roof. ExpertPages.com. <https://blog.expertpages.com/in-the-news/expert-witnesses-used-during-trial-of-dylann-roof.htm>. Accessed Apr. 22, 2025.

This article outlines the expert witnesses called by the prosecution in Roof's trial, including FBI experts—who analyzed a USB drive filled with white supremacist messages, and consulted specialists in identifying a more comprehensive motive for Roof. It also focuses on Roof's mental state, both from the information uncovered in his personal belongings and from his refusal to cooperate with mental health consultants. This article maintains that Roof had been planning an attack against black Americans for the purpose of instilling into them fear, and for the purpose of inciting a eugenics-era war between black and white race demographics.

United States v. Roof, United States District Court for the District of South Carolina, December 16, 2016. [https://www.justice.gov/crt/case-document/file/1339781/dl?inline=](https://www.justice.gov/crt/case-document/file/1339781/dl?inline=1) (pp. 43-54)

This court case transcript provides all verbal communication within the court. It outlines the activities of Dylann Roof and witnesses during the shooting. Background information regarding where Roof was at the scene of the crime, where witnesses were, what witnesses recall occurring, and what they recall Roof doing. Roof's verbal communication while in the church is recorded here, including his first verbal communication of motive—to the group he performed his terrorist attack on. Recorded here is also evidence that Roof had been planning his attack for months. Insight to Roof's motive is especially important in determining whether Roof could be

categorized as fitting the self-conscious, fearful, and subsequently arrogant demographic of antisocial offenders.

Most notable research on hate crime motivation, common demographic details of offenders, and subsequent susceptibility of offenders provide evidence that individuals like Dylann Roof are most often influenced by social isolation and exposure to extremist ideologies—especially those most prominent in the online spaces Roof was engaging with prior to his offense. The Uncertainty-Identity Theory posited by Michael Hogg provides one potential explanation and area of study for such behavior, emphasizing the adoption of group identities to manage individual self-consciousness and doubt (Hogg, 2012).

Hate crimes are typically punished to an extent more severe under federal and state law than other violent crimes, for their broader social implications and societal message-sending. Though hate crimes are consistently perpetrated by individuals with the same demographic characteristics, the legal framework most often treats perpetrators strictly as criminal actors, lacking integration of psychological or sociological insight. Aforementioned research promotes that legal standards could be more effective if they incorporated mechanisms for early identification of those most at risk of radicalization—those who are young, isolated, uneducated, and self-conscious.

While much of this research does align with legal policy in acknowledging the danger of hate crimes as compared to other offenses, prevention methods are greatly lacking. Current law surrounding hate crime tends to focus on the individual as an actor—which does not allow for profiling of those with most potential to offend, and subsequently does not allow for prevention methods to take place prior to the crime being committed. This would act both as a source of

formal and informal deterrence, and as a source of warning; had the profile of potential hate crime offender and terrorist been common knowledge, social repulsion likely would have prevented action—in the form of family, school, or work intervention. Despite the antisocial behaviors expressed by Dylann Roof, social repulsion does not appear in one specific way, and likely could have greatly suppressed his terrorist pursuit. Informal and formal deterrence act as means of stifling prospective actions of terror by maintaining that individuals with demographic characteristics profiling them as likely to commit hate crimes should be treated as such. Legal enforcement practices also reveal disproportionate effects—such as inaccurate profiling of minority communities as perpetrators of terrorism and hate crime.

Perhaps the largest limitation in current research is the lack of longitudinal studies—those that trace the development of extremist beliefs through a period of time and across different socio-economic backgrounds, to determine peaks in knowledge, determine what demographics are most well-informed, and determine differences in perspective among different demographics. There is very little data regarding the intersection of media consumption, educational gaps, and social isolation that eventually creates hate-based violence. Research should incorporate interdisciplinary approaches that blend psychology, sociology, criminology, and media studies to create a more holistic understanding of how and why radicalization occurs.

Reform is warranted. Law enforcement and education systems are responsible for implementing early-intervention programs that teach and enhance media literacy skills, promote intergroup empathy, drive interpersonal communication and promote healthy expression of emotion, and provide psychological support to isolated youth, not only in the form of stigmatizing school counselors and self-help hotlines, but in the form of educated authority figures—such as teachers, community leaders, police, and parents. Legal standards surrounding hate crime prevention

should be expanded immensely—including profiling of the most susceptible, and perhaps in the form of both public service announcements and independent public training programs available to the community. Individualized education would lower the potential for misunderstanding and subsequent arrogance in complex subjects most susceptible to arrogance; the demographic characteristics targeted in hate crime, expose students to a learning opportunity; allowing them to better gauge academic concepts in general, and provide students the ability to develop an educated and ontologically-sound sociological imagination from an early age.



## Sources Cited

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